

Animals - Plovers

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PLOVERS DOING OK



■ A female piping plover hatched three babies at Duxbury Beach this year.



■ Kate Jones, 18, a monitor at Duxbury Beach, observes the same nests and birds every day. It looks like a good year for piping plovers. GREG DERR photos/The Patriot Ledger

Threatened species lays 52 eggs on Duxbury Beach

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The Patriot Ledger

DUXBURY

Efforts to protect piping plovers at Duxbury Beach could be more successful this year than last, even after the Buzzards Bay oil spill.

Thirteen nests hold newly hatched chicks and a few eggs, said Jim Dimmeen, endangered species officer at Duxbury Beach. Each nest holds four eggs, so as many as 52 plovers could hatch.

"They're looking great," Dimmeen said, partly because no nests have been washed out like last year.

"They nested a little bit higher, and didn't have the same sort of winter," he

said. Last year, 14 pairs of plovers nested on the beach, but waves washed six of the nests away.

The piping plover is a threatened species, which means it could become endangered if the population drops too low. Because the birds are threatened, wildlife officials can take steps to prevent further population decreases.

Those steps involve monitoring the nests between 7 a.m. and 8 p.m. to ensure their safety and watching the birds' movements. Officials build wire structures around the nests to keep predators out.

The dangers the chicks face are great, both before and after they hatch, said Andrea Jones, director of the Coastal

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Waterbird Program. Jones oversees some of Massachusetts' annual efforts to protect piping plovers.

The eggs and chicks are vulnerable to everything from logs digging up unprotected nests to cars rolling over them.

"This is why the intensive measures we have to protect them are there," she said.

Officials became concerned about plovers in the 1980s when increased beach use cut into their natural habitat. After the federal government added the plovers to the threatened species list in 1987,

Massachusetts agencies began working to develop protection plans that would increase the birds' population.

The efforts have made a difference. In 1987, only 126 pairs nested in Massachusetts, but in 2000, more than 500 pairs nested.

Jones said she doesn't know whether officials will ever remove the plover from the threatened species list.

"At this point, there probably isn't that much more space for them," she said. "Unless we did something really dramatic, the numbers probably aren't going to change all that much."

The population climbed steadily when protective

measures first began but has since leveled off.

Massachusetts beaches simply can't handle many

more nests, Jones said, and "we've got the bulk of the habitat right here."

The birds fly south in the winter, where they do not face as many dangers. Once the new chicks can fly, the dangers lessen somewhat, she said.

The nests at Plymouth Beach are also doing well, Jones said, and officials there are working to make the beach safer for the

birds by rerouting vehicular traffic.

For Kate Jones of Duxbury, who is no relation to Andrea Jones,

the plovers are more than a few cute birds. The 18-year-old is one of the monitors

watching the nests and the birds each day. She watches the same nests and birds every day

and observes the animals without interfering with their natural tendencies and behaviors. Her responsibilities include

making sure nothing is bothering the birds.

"It's just a great summer job," she said. She's been successful, too: All four of the eggs she monitored hatched.

She will monitor her nest until all the chicks are able to fly away and defend themselves, which will probably be in late July or early August.

But some protection programs will need to run later into the summer.

Andrea Jones said the oil spill last month in Buzzards Bay left some piping plovers covered in oil.

Officials decided not to clean the birds immediately

because the stressful experience could have kept them from laying eggs.

"They did lay eggs, despite the fact that they were oiled and probably ingesting oil," Andrea Jones said. But they were delayed because of the cleanup, she said, so those eggs have not hatched yet.

Officials are worried that the oil on the birds might have rubbed onto the eggs, she said. That could suffocate the eggs, but officials must wait the

normal incubation period of about 28 days before finding out.

None of the plovers died because of the spill, she said.

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